

Oakland Tribune

Navy reservist from Livermore commended for protecting rabbi

By Mike White
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Saturday, January 24, 2004 - LIVERMORE -- Petty Officer 1st Class Bob Page had plenty of motivation to save the life of a chaplain in Iraq. In addition to his strong religious convictions, he knew that if something tragic happened to the clergyman, troop morale would plummet.

What's more, it was his job.

A 38-year-old Navy reservist from Livermore, Page is a religious program specialist. His mission was to assist the chaplain with the operation of religious programs, and also to protect him if he came under fire.

But the man Page protected was no ordinary chaplain -- he was the only rabbi serving in Iraq at the time. And his superiors say what Page did to protect him was outstanding.

Friday, Page was awarded the Bronze Star with a designation of "V," identifying it as resulting from an act of combat heroism.

When Page's unit came under fire on March 23, 2003, near Nasariya, Page covered the chaplain with his body, willing to sacrifice himself to protect him, if necessary. A former platoon sergeant with the Marines, Page used his combat knowledge to return fire and direct other Marines around him to provide covering fire.

"I was directing the Marines to help me out because all I had was a pistol and they had rifles. We fought a while. We almost got it that day," Page said.

Lt. Gen. J.T. Conway, commanding general of the I Marine Expeditionary Force, acknowledged Page for his accomplishments.

"When the battalion began taking fire from the right flank position, he immediately took action to ensure the chaplain's safety by standing over him and using his person as protective cover. When the battalion received heavy fire, he immediately moved the chaplain from the vehicle, dug a mortar hole and covered the chaplain with his body," Conway wrote in a citation accompanying the medal.

Page had served in the Marines in active duty and in the reserves for 16 years, but switched to the Navy Reserves two years ago because of his religious convictions. The Navy position was the only one that offered him a chance to work in the ministry. Before switching to the Navy, the former television news producer had gone through a religious awakening. He had been inspired by a pastor on television.

"I started reading the Bible. One day I got on my knees and prayed. It changed my life," he said.

He found his wife, Lori, through a Christian singles group. They have one child, Gabriel, 18 months, and Lori is pregnant with their second child. He began working as a real estate agent in Livermore before being called to active duty, and expects to return to the job after his tour of duty.

When he was first called to active duty and sent to Iraq, the born-again Christian was surprised, but not disappointed, that he was assigned to protect a rabbi.

"I went into this to protect one of God's chosen people and keep him alive. It doesn't matter if he is a Christian, a Jew or a Muslim," he said.

The two became close friends and learned from one another.

"I didn't try to tell him how wrong he was, I tried to learn from him," Page said.

When his daughter is born, he plans on naming her Sara Elson Page, after Rabbi Irv Elson.

Elson, of Philadelphia, and Page's family members from Northern California will attend today's award service in the Officers Club at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, near San Diego.

When Page's first tour of duty was completed last summer, he returned home to Livermore to pursue his real estate career, but he was called back to service last week. He will be sent to Iraq again, although he is not allowed to say when. This time around, he expects to be assigned to a chaplain other than Elson.

He is believed to be the first Navy reservist and the first religious program specialist to receive the Bronze Star.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Bronze Star in 1944 on the recommendation of Gen. George C. Marshall. The intent of the award was to improve morale among ground troops who lead "miserable lives of extreme discomfort" and endure the greatest hardships during combat. Numerous soldiers who have served in Iraq have received the award, including Army private Jessica Lynch, who was rescued by U.S. special forces from a Nasariya hospital last year.

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